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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000645

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2016
TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: NATIONAL DIALOGUE CONFERENCE BEGINS ON
POSITIVE NOTE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) For the first time since the 1989 Ta'if Accord, the full range of Lebanon's political leadership is now engaged in face-to-face negotiations -- this time, in Beirut rather than a foreign venue (and without any international "referees"). The first session on March 2 closed with consensus agreement regarding the expansion of UNIIIC's mandate to investigate acts of political violence in addition to the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, as well as support for the establishment of an international tribunal. The evening session, which dealt with the situation of the presidency, was more combative, as the participants, particularly Michel Aoun and his March 14 adversaries, duelled over Lahoud's removal. Those present informed us that Hassan Nasrallah and Amal's Berri remained relatively above the fray on this issue, leading to speculation that a pre-conference deal had been cut with the March 14 forces. Samir Ja'ja' reportedly surprised the attendees by making a vague suggestion to Nasrallah concerning a linkage between support for Lahoud's removal with support for Hizballah's weapons, but Saad Hariri denied this to be the case. Aoun wishes to completely drop discussion of the presidency, but he appears at this time to be a solitary voice. No one yet knows if Lahoud is getting ready to vacate the Presidential Palace. End summary.

12. (C) Although starting with a hour's delay, the political leaders of Lebanon -- inter alia, Saad Hariri, Michel Aoun, Walid Jumblatt, Hassan Nasrallah, Fouad Siniora, Samir Ja'ja', Nabih Berri, Amin Gemayel, Pierre Gemayal, Mohammed Safadi, Boutros Harb, Elias Skaff, Hagop Pakradonian (Armenian), Michel Murr and Ghassan Tueni (Greek Orthodox) -- gradually drifted in into the heavily-guarded parliament building late yesterday morning, proving wrong several commentators who had said Nabih Berri's initiative was insubstantial and would never occur. Sitting around a circular table (with arch rivals Jumblatt and Nasrallah separated by three relative innocents), the attendees listened to Lebanon's national anthem and Berri's opening remarks, which included an appeal for calm discourse, and a note from the UN SYG Kofi Annan.

HARIRI INVESTIGATION

13. (C) Wisely dealing with the easiest agenda item first -- the investigation into the assassination of Hariri -- the participants discussed the situation for nearly three hours and reached a consensus agreement to approve the expansion of the UNIIIC investigation to other serious acts of political

violence (committed since October 2004) and to support the Siniora government as it works with the UN to establish an international tribunal to deal with the prosecution of those accused. Although the investigation was the least problematic of the issues on the "national dialogue" agenda, its resolution was by no means a given. (Note: The investigation and tribunal issues were the stated reason for the walk-out by the five Shia ministers from the Siniora cabinet on December 12, which led to a 7-week paralysis of the government. The dialogue's agreement to support the UNIIIC's investigation of other acts of political violence would also presumably include the almost-successful assassination of Minister of Telecommunications (and close Jumblatt ally) Marwan Hamadeh in October 2004, which Hamadeh is convinced was carried out by Hizballah under Syrian direction. In the complex world of Lebanese politics, where nearly every politician has something to regret, approval of the broader-scope international investigation coupled with an independent international tribunal are not items to be taken lightly or considered as pro forma achievements. End note.)

THE PRESIDENCY

14. (C) When the talks recommenced at 1800 on March 2, the contentious and critical issue of UNSCR 1559 was taken up. Although Hizballah's weapons were referred to frequently, they were often tangential to the principal topic of debate -- namely, the presidency. Although Michel Aoun refrained (probably with great difficulty) from directly stating that he should be president, nearly every argument made by Aoun implied that he was the only logical successor to Lahoud. Acting Minister of Interior Ahmad Fatfat -- also one of the participants -- told the Ambassador early on March 3 that

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throughout the combative, but still constructive evening session, the debate was carried on primarily with Ja'ja' and Jumblatt on one side arguing that Lahoud had to be immediately removed, and Nasrallah declaring on the other side that it was a non-starter unless the leaders could agree on Lahoud's successor -- and whether that successor would "support the resistance."

15. (C) According to Fatfat, Aoun sensed an opportunity in this disagreement and repeatedly tried to exacerbate the differences. But this tactic failed to break the overall effort by all involved to stay engaged. Saad Hariri, meanwhile, was very quiet, interjecting sporadic comments, but allowing his political allies to carry the fight. Following the meeting, Minister of Industry and MP Pierre Gemayel, while informing us that the atmosphere was better than he had expected, added that Nasrallah was not opposed to discussing the fate of Lahoud, but only within a package that would include who is the next president and what would the future president's position would be on Hizballah's militia. According to Gemayel, Nasrallah said to the other political leaders that, "he is ready to discuss his weapons, provided that there is a strong army and institutions that could protect the resistance." Again according to Gemayel, Nasrallah told the March 14 leaders directly, "You say Syria is pointing a gun to your heads, but we also have Israeli and American guns pointed at our heads." The evening session broke up without a consensus, but several of those present indicated progress was being made on the matter of Lahoud.

16. (C) Walid Jumblatt, speaking with the Ambassador just after the evening session, said he was basically pleased, although he suspected that Nasrallah was trying to trade reassurances on his arms for flexibility in ousting Lahoud. "We won't go along with that," Jumblatt insisted. Jumblatt's close advisor Marwan Hamadeh concurred with his colleague and said it appeared critical to Nasrallah that he have the name of the next president before he folds his cards.

¶7. (C) The first day's discussions adjourned at approximately 2100, with Berri making claims that "the ice had melted" and the atmosphere, especially between political adversaries, was positive. Most attendees concurred with this observation and were cautiously hopeful concerning Friday's session.

¶8. (C) An interesting development is that according to several attendees (each political leader was allowed to bring two advisors to the meeting), Nasrallah did not automatically side with Aoun when the former general was engaged in heated exchanges. Whether this implies some sort of deal between Hariri and Nasrallah, or simply that Aoun's ambition is driving him to the margins, is still to be determined. Speaking with the Ambassador earlier today, Saad Hariri denied that he had made any kind of deal with Nasrallah that would undermine the principles of UNSCR 1559. Hariri said that, while the dialogue could concentrate on timing and implementation of UNSCR 1559, the resolution itself had to be accepted as a given.

REACTION OF AOUN

¶9. (C) Gebran Bassil, Aoun's closest advisor, told poloff on March 3 that Aoun is "very upset" that the March 14 coalition participants are focusing only on Lahoud's removal -- to the exclusion of everything else. Bassil heatedly stated that Aoun acknowledges Lahoud is a liability and it would be better for Lebanon if he departed, but according to Bassil, Jumblatt, Ja'ja' and Hariri are refusing to engage on what happens following his departure -- including the related questions of what happens to the country's stability and security. Bassil argued that these issues were far more important than the isolated and ineffectual Lahoud.

¶10. (C) Bassil also said that Aoun is upset that Jumblatt is leaving the dialogue tonight to visit Washington. Bassil stated that his appointed representative, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, cannot make the difficult decisions that have to be made over the next few days if this conference is to be successful. According to Bassil, Michel Aoun is wondering why Jumblatt is the only one who thinks he can leave. (Note: The Ambassador has discussed with Jumblatt repeatedly whether he would like to postpone the Washington visit. As late as 3/3 in the evening, Jumblatt refused to contemplate a delay. His trip, he noted, was set up before Berri's dialogue. End note.)

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¶11. (C) In an unrelated but important matter, Bassil told poloff that in an interview on March 2 on the Lebanese television station LBC, Michel Aoun had apologized for his earlier statements that hostage-taking was sometimes justified. According to Bassil, Aoun told the interviewer he was completely wrong and wanted to emphasize that nothing could justify such actions. Bassil said the former general wanted to ensure that Washington was aware of his statements.

CONSENSUS THAT LAHOUD SHOULD LEAVE

¶12. (C) MP Boutros Harb told the Ambassador on Friday morning the overall climate of the discussions was serious, which was a good sign that the participants intended to work toward real solutions. Harb said a great deal of time had been spent dealing with the "qualifications" of the new president, and especially what his policies would be. Harb said that despite differences, all present had more or less agreed that Lahoud should depart. Even MP Michel Murr, a staunch supporter of the pro-Syrian president, acknowledged Lahoud should leave, but requested an honorable departure.

¶13. (C) In the opinion of Boutros Harb, the most significant comments made were Nasrallah's statement that

Hizballah had changed its ideology to the position that, "its weapons were no longer for the liberation of Jerusalem, but solely for the liberation of Lebanon."

¶14. (C) Harb concluded that all the meeting's participants were making a genuine effort, and that Siniora was particularly effective in defending the government and the interests of the Sunni community. Harb stated that no matter the number of issues resolved, all the participants were committed to say at the end of the conference that the dialogue had been a success.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Speaking to the Ambassador by phone just before today's session resumed, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that the dialogue was proceeding "much better than even I hoped." He said that, no matter what happens to the UNSCR 1559 discussion ("very hard"), the participants agreed that they would declare the dialogue a success, as declarations that the dialogue had failed would "be dangerous." Certainly there was a palpable sense of relief in Lebanon -- even reflected in the currency and stock markets -- that an unprecedented meeting among harsh rivals could indeed take place in Beirut without the presence of foreign mediators. At least during the dialogue's first day, Lebanon's political leaders seemed to be acting responsibly.

FELTMAN